

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Year of Wonders

Author: Geraldine Brooks

Geraldine Brooks is an Australian author who grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney. She attended Sydney University and worked as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. As the Greg Shackleton Memorial Scholar she completed a Master's Degree in journalism at Columbia University in New York City in 1983. Subsequently Brooks worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans winning in 1990 (with Tony Horwitz) the Overseas Press Club Award for best print coverage of the first Gulf War.

Name: Geraldine Brooks

Born: Sydney, Australia

Education: Sydney University, M.A. Columbia University, 1983



Career:

Journalist. *The Wall Street Journal*, Middle Eastern correspondent, 1988—.

Awards:

Hal Boyle Award, Overseas Press Club of America, 1990, for the best daily newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad.

Past Writings:

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women, Anchor Books (New York City), 1995.

Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over, Anchor Books/ Doubleday (New York City), 1998.

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague, Viking (New York City), 2001.

March, Viking Press (New York, NY), 2005.



Author: Geraldine Brooks (2)

Sidelights:

Geraldine Brooks the author (not to be confused with Geraldine Brooks the film and stage actress) has won awards for her Mid-East correspondence for the *Wall Street Journal*, which included covering the Persian Gulf War. She channeled a unique part of that experience into her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*. When Brooks first arrived in the Middle East she felt cut off, as a female correspondent, from much of Muslim society. But she turned that liability into an advantage when she donned the hijab (the black veil worn by most Muslim women in the Middle East) and thereby enabled herself to penetrate the cloistered world of Muslim women.

The title of *Nine Parts of Desire* comes from an interpretation of the Koran offered by the Shiite branch: "Almighty God created sexual desires in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." As Laura Shapiro, writing for *Newsweek* commented, "Good enough reason to keep women under wraps." But Brooks uncovered a complex picture in her investigation of Muslim women's lives that goes beyond the Western assumption of women's oppression and isolation from public life.

Brooks interviews a wide range of Muslim women, from belly dancers to housewives, and from activists to female army recruits; her list of interviewees includes Queen Noor of Jordan and Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter. Her discoveries are fascinating and wide-ranging, if sometimes contradictory. According to Brooks, wrote *Booklist* contributor Mary Ellen Sullivan, sexual gratification is considered "an inherent right" for Muslim women, but genital mutilation is still a common practice. It may surprise some Americans to read that women fare better in Iran than the rest of the Middle East. Brooks explains, "To Muslim women elsewhere... the Iranian woman riding to work on her motorbike, even with her billowing chador gripped firmly in her teeth, looks like a figure of envy." By wearing the chador herself, Brooks discovers a camaraderie among the women that she has experienced elsewhere, as when she bakes bread with Kurdish women. But when she notices a young boy sampling bits of bread that his sister sweats to make, she sees the negative side of strict sexual divisions as well: "His sister, not much older, was already part of our bread-making assembly line. Why should he learn so young that her role was to toil for his pleasure?"

Reviews of Brooks's first book were generally very positive. Sullivan called Brooks "a wonderful writer and thinker," noting that her study gives readers new insight into the lives of Muslim women. *Publishers Weekly* called the book a "powerful and enlightening report" that brings Westerners much closer to the reality of Muslim life for women. And Laura Shapiro of *Newsweek* admired the first-hand reporting that led Brooks to an "intimacy with these women [that] made it impossible either to romanticize or to demonize the tradition that ruled them."

A few years later Brooks followed up her first book with *Foreign Correspondence*, a memoir of her childhood that focuses on the importance of foreign pen pals to her sense of an independent identity and freedom from what she then considered the boring backwater of her hometown, Sydney, Australia.

The frame of the narrative is the approaching death of Brooks's father, which brings her back to Sydney from her life as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*. While going through family papers she finds letters from pen pals—from as far as the United States, France, and Israel—she had long ago forgotten. Rereading these letters brings her back to her youthful sense of restlessness and early belief that "real life happened in far-off lands." During her childhood and adolescence, the pen pals fulfilled her yearning for the exotic, and gave a sense of breaking away, as *Booklist's* Donna Seaman commented, from "Australia's mid-century, Anglo-focused insularity." The experience was formative in bringing Brooks to her current position as a traveling journalist and "fireman" for the *Wall Street Journal* (the term identifies journalists who can report on controversial subjects and issues). Brooks's rereading inspired her to look up her old pen pals, and among other things to tell them the story of Joannie, her pen pal from the United States who spent the summer in Switzerland and Martha's Vineyard, but whose glamorous-sounding life ended early from the ravages of anorexia.



Author: Geraldine Brooks (3)

Sidelights: (Continued)

Reviews of *Foreign Correspondence* ranged from hot to cold. Seaman termed the book a “magnetic memoir,” while *Publishers Weekly* deemed it “competent but unexciting.” A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* offered unadulterated praise, calling it an “evocative, superbly written tale of a woman’s journey to self-understanding.”

Further Readings About the Author:

Periodicals

Booklist, September 15, 1994, p. 88; November 1, 1997, p. 436.

Kirkus Reviews, November 1, 1997, pp. 1616-1617.

Newsweek, February 13, 1995, p. 81.

New York Times Book Review, January 8, 1995, p. 14.

Publishers Weekly, November 21, 1994, p. 64; October 27, 1997, p. 57.*

Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2005.



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Year of Wonders

Geraldine Brooks Interview:

Publishers Weekly, August 13, 2001

Life and Death in Eyam. (Geraldine Brooks, author of '*Year of Wonders*') Steinberg, Sybil.

It's a long way from the modest neighborhood in Sydney, Australia, where Geraldine Brooks was born, to the frontlines of the intifada in Gaza and the battles of Kurdish guerrillas in Iraq; to meetings with the daughter of the Ayatollah Khomeini and with King Hussein and Queen Noor; to observing the carriage in Bosnia and Somalia; to a one-night-only performance as a belly dancer at a Cairo nightclub. During her 20-year career as a journalist, challenging, exhilarating and life-threatening experiences were Brooks's daily fare.

But it's an even longer way from the tiny village of Eyam (pronounced "eem") in Derbyshire, England, to the equally small village of Waterford in Virginia, where Brooks now lives, because the distance here is the time line of centuries. A decade ago, Brooks had never heard of Eyam. She and her husband, journalist Tony Horwitz, were living in London then, from where she jetted off to Lebanon or Syria or Iraq, as *The Wall Street Journal's* correspondent in the Middle East. In 1990, when she was accompanying Tony on a story he was covering in the Pennine district of England, she noticed a fingerpost pointing to Plague Village. What she found there was the catalyst for her first novel, *Year of Wonders* (*Forecasts*, June 25), out from Viking this month.

When the bubonic plague erupted in Eyam in 1665, Brooks learned, the rector called upon the community to quarantine themselves from the outside world rather than risk spreading the disease. During the following year, two-thirds of the villagers died in horrible agony; families were decimated; the remaining population, close to starvation and despair, could scarcely tend their sheep or work in the lead mines, the community's two sources of income. When the plague finally abated, the survivors had undergone extraordinary suffering, and for some a loss of faith.

Brooks found an account of the villagers' ordeal in the parish church, and also in a small museum that records the significant events of the quarantine year. Brooks remembers that her fascination with the story was immediate and strong, as she contemplated the moral and social consequences of this incident. "What an extraordinary thing the rector did, bringing people to a decision like that. I couldn't stop thinking about that incredible sacrifice," she says.

She regularly returned to Eyam in her imagination, but there was no space in her busy life to develop the story that had lodged in her imagination. During the ensuing years, she wrote two nonfiction books. *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (1995) is an empathetic consideration of the plight of women in Muslim countries where a fundamentalist, misogynistic interpretation of the Koran has led to female subjugation. In 1998, she published *Foreign Correspondence: A Penpal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*, a memoir of her youth in Sydney during which five international pen pals stimulated her curiosity about the world and instilled her "craving for risk and adventure." Both books were issued by Doubleday and received excellent reviews.

It wasn't until *Foreign Correspondence* won Australia's 1998 Kibble Award, granted to encourage women writers, with its prize of \$20,000, that Brooks felt she could "buy some time" and indulge her desire to write about the plague year in Eyam. She gave herself six months to develop the novel and sent the early chapters to her husband's agent, Kris Dahl at ICM, who voiced encouragement immediately.



Book: Year of Wonders

Geraldine Brooks Interview: (Continued)

"By that time we were living here," Brooks says, referring to the tiny (200 people), postcard-perfect village of Waterford, whose small community evokes in many ways the traditional routines of Eyam. Located in the rolling countryside only an hour from Washington, D.C., the town is framed by vistas of green fields beyond which the blue hills of the Appalachian range rise gently. The village consists of meticulously preserved old houses of different styles and periods, a felicitous mixture of red brick, rough-hewn stone and trim clapboard, most retaining their vestigial outbuildings; plus a post office and a general store.

Brooks's own house is a square white building of stucco over brick covered by ivy and an exuberant trumpet vine. It was built in 1810 as a two-room cottage, with a kitchen added during the Civil War and an open dining area later. The result is a charming arrangement of connecting rooms, each on a different level on the ground floor, and equally quaint ups and downs in the bedroom and workroom space above. Old English, Australian and early American furniture preserve its historical atmosphere, with oriental throw rugs on the sloping wooden floors, a handsome antique quilt on the living room wall and naif country paintings. There's a tree-shaded well in the brick courtyard, a kitchen garden of herbs and vegetables and a bucolic vista of rolling meadows, picturesquely provided with cows and horses, bordered by shrubs and flowers and animated by songbirds swooping down to a feeder on the brick terrace.

Seen in this milieu, it's even more difficult to reconcile Brooks's appearance—her slim figure seems almost fragile, and she speaks in a gentle voice—with the conventional image of a journalist in turmoil-ridden areas of the world. Looking far younger than her age, 47, she has a fair, almost translucent complexion; pale blue eyes centered with cobalt irises dominate her heart-shaped face. Her dark hair falls in a smooth cap, shorter now than in earlier book-jacket photos in which she wore it Steinem-like, long and loose. Dressed in a white linen smock and unadorned save for luminous mother-of-pearl earrings, she hugs five-year-old Nathaniel, a blond cherub with his mother's eyes, and sends him off to play; two friendly dogs remain to greet a visitor. Her husband, now a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, is off in Alaska researching a book. With the ease of a confident cook, Brooks serves *PW* a gourmet lunch, including fragrant bread just out of the oven.

Just a few steps away upstairs, her writing studio is neat and austere. Its six-paned window has the original wavy and bubble-filled glass. There Brooks pursued her research, beginning with a book by Eyam amateur historian John C. Clifford, who had written an account of the plague year. Brooks returned to the Peak District to speak with Clifford and also gathered a wealth of anecdotal information that became the subplots of her novel. One of the most vivid and harrowing passages in *Year of Wonders* describes a claustrophobic descent into a mine and the arduous process of gouging ore out of rock, and *PW* is relieved to find that Brooks did not actually attempt this feat, but gleaned her information from a man who specialized in mining lore and who happened to be in the Eyam museum one day when she was there. He told her about the practice of "nicking a stowe" (whittling a mark on the timbers at the entrance to a mine for nine consecutive weeks, after which ownership is established by showing an official a dish of ore), and about the custom of punishing miners engaged in illicit activities by impaling them with a knife through their hands. Both these events occur in Brooks's dramatic narrative.

Brooks pored over 17th-century medical texts, books on herbal medicines, midwifery, witch trials and social history. "People who were literate in those days spoke like poets," she says. She also perused numerous sermons and the journal of a country rector of that period, to absorb the flavor of her fictional vicar Michael Mompellion's exhortations. "I was impressed by how widely read they were, even the rural clergy. The journalist in me loves to get something like that right." The historical rector was named William Mompesson. Brooks decided to change the name after she realized that her character would have a dark side to his personality and harbor a crucial secret. "I feel a slight twinge of guilt for taking liberties with the rector," she admits, but the exigencies of fiction, and in particular, the actions of her protagonist, Anna Firth, required the change.



Book: Year of Wonders

Geraldine Brooks Interview: (Continued)

Anna, who narrates the novel, is an 18-year-old widow and mother of two young sons when the story begins. As housemaid to the rector and his wife, Elinor, she has insights about a more refined culture. Elinor Mompellion, a woman of surpassing kindness and devotion to her husband and his flock, has taught Anna to read. The fates of these two women provide one of the novel's surprises. In the end, Elinor is condemned by a harsh interpretation of the Bible, while Anna escapes her restrictive milieu and finds personal and emotional liberation.

In creating these two characters, Brooks was undoubtedly influenced by her own life and experiences. Growing up in Australia when the country still suffered from "cultural cringe," she shared the feeling that women's roles in society were limited. She says she can almost pinpoint the day that Germaine Greer came home to Sydney, bearing her strident message of feminism. "It was a funny time to be at a Catholic girls' school," she muses. On the one hand, her education emphasized traditional female roles. On the other, the nun who was the school's principal worked in a school in NYC's Harlem on sabbatical and returned with radical views of opportunities for women.

Central to her novel's setting is the omnipresent influence of religion in 17th-century England and the competing power of superstition among the fearful and lonely. Brooks is particularly interested in that time "when religion was up for grabs:" she says. "There was a real ferment after the Puritans were supplanted. To have something so central to your life so much under question" had to be crucial, she speculates. She is singularly qualified to consider the effect of religion on individual lives. A convert from Catholicism to Judaism after her marriage, she also became thoroughly conversant with the Koran and with Muslim traditions during her years in the Middle East. Her generosity of spirit and open-minded tolerance is a result of early nurturing at home (her Protestant father, who served in Palestine in World War II, was fervently pro-Israel; inspired by his zeal for the underdog, Brooks was certainly the only girl in her parochial school to wear a Jewish Star of David over the collar of her uniform) and the later influences of many cultures. "I don't think of myself as a religious person even though I've had two major religions in my life," she says. In her novel's Afterward, she refers to her "secular mind." "Yet what Salman Rushdie calls the "'religion-shaped hole in modern life' looms large in my own. I've always been drawn to religious people. I'm fascinated by what makes people make certain choices."

Once begun, *Year of Wonders* went very quickly, "mainly because I had been thinking about it for so long." Part of the book was written in Sydney, where Brooks and family lived for a year to be near her octogenarian widowed mother. "Anna's voice was very clear in my head," Brooks says. "That's what I love. It's magical to start writing in the morning and see what develops. Anna surprised me sometimes. That's the joy. It was very hard to stop spending my days with her."

Susan Petersen Kennedy at Viking bought the book straight off, and Molly Stem edited it. Foreign rights in seven countries were sold within one week, with other sales since. BOMC, Literary Guild and the QPB will offer the novel as a featured alternate. An eight-city tour is lined up. Brooks is elated that the book will be read on the BBC, she hopes by someone who can pronounce the archaic local dialect. She confesses that she herself has only read such words as "chouse" and "branks," and has no idea of how they sound.

Her second novel is already under contract to Viking. It's another historical narrative, but "scarily different. Instead of one year in one place, it covers six centuries and three countries." Again, it's based on a true story contained in a manuscript created in Moorish Spain. And again, it's "very much about religion and the fear of the other."

Asked whether she thinks her former colleagues may scoff at her switch to another genre, in particular that of the much-maligned historical novel, Brooks professes to have no qualms. She ticks off five or six of her erstwhile



Book: Year of Wonders

Geraldine Brooks Interview: (Continued)

comrades in the journalism trade who've written thrillers. She's much more concerned, she says, about the opinion of other fiction writers she admires.

Brooks thinks she'll probably never return to journalism. "After Natty was born, I became less avid in the pursuit of—not the bad guys, I still would want to go after them—but I hated having to harry people who didn't want to talk to you.

"I hope this is my life now," she says. "I love doing it so much. It comes down to whether you're a person who likes to be alone in a room, and I've discovered that I am. I think that fiction writing was a very secret, repressed desire of my heart. The fact of having a novel published is a joy I never looked for."

Full Text: Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

Author:

Geraldine Brooks, born and raised in Sydney, Australia, spent eleven years as a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent for the Middle East (1987-98). She covered the Persian Gulf War, as well as Bosnia, and Somalia. When she arrived in the Middle East, she found that she could interview dignitaries, but could not speak to ordinary Muslim male citizens, who only spoke to women related to them. After a year of frustration, she decided to don the hijab, or veil, and began speaking to Muslim women for her stories. In this cloistered world, she found a surprising degree of candor and information not available to her male counterparts.

Her first non-fiction book, *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women*, is a fascinating glimpse into the sequestered lives of Islamic women from different countries and professions. Her interviewees include Jordan's Queen Noor and the Ayatolla Khomeini's daughter. Some of her discoveries are surprising. Brooks cites Iran as being a country of hope for women, where activists such as Khomeini's daughter have worked to give women a greater political voice, job opportunities, and even a chance to participate in sports. Other findings are not so encouraging: the practice of genital mutilation, and honor killings (the practice of murdering a woman who has disgraced her family by having pre-marital sex) are still practiced in some countries. The title *Nine Parts of Desire* comes from a Shiite interpretation of the Koran: "Almighty God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." The title is significant because Brooks' own study of the Koran yields some findings that are contradictory to the Western world's idea of Islam. For example, Mohammed, Islam's founder, respected women and wrote that they had a right to sexual pleasure. That his teachings have been manipulated by many Muslim governments is one of the themes of her book. A second book, *Foreign Correspondence: A Pen Pal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*, published in 1998, is a memoir of childhood that credits her pen pals in influencing her career choice. Brooks' pen pals from America, France and Israel gave her the sense that "real life happened in far off lands."

Year of Wonders, published in 2001, is Brooks' first fiction work. While based in London during her stint as *Wall Street Journal's* Middle Eastern correspondent, Brooks and her husband, while sightseeing in 1990, came upon a finger post pointing to Plague Village. The village, called Eyam (pronounced "eem"), had a historical display in the parish church. When bubonic plague erupted in 1665 in Eyam, Brooks learned, the rector called upon the village to quarantine itself to avoid spreading the disease. Two-thirds of the population died the following year, with many families suffering multiple deaths. Brooks said that during the years she covered the news of Bosnia and Somalia, the story of Eyam was constantly on her mind. She returned to Eyam and consulted with the local historian, John Clifford, delving into seventeenth-century medical texts, journals, sermons, Restoration poetry and even lead mining history to research the novel. Her journalistic background is evident in the historically accurate details of life, illness and death of these English villagers.

Brooks is the recipient of the Hal Boyle Award in 1990, for the best daily newspaper or wire service reporting from abroad, as well as Australia's 1998 Kibble Award. This \$20,000 grant allowed her to research and write *Year of Wonders*. She lives today in the village of Waterford, Virginia (approximately the same size as Eyam) with her husband, journalist Tony Horwitz, and their son Nathaniel.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Summary:

In the year 1665 George Viccars, a tailor from London, comes to board at the cottage of Anna, an 18-year-old widow with two children. At first, Anna is glad of his presence, as Viccars is a much-needed father figure for her two boys. Anna, whose husband was killed in a mining accident, does housekeeping for the newly-arrived Rector Michael Mompellion and his wife Elinor. The childless Elinor teaches Anna about herbs, gardening and literature. Viccars suddenly comes down with signs of the plague and is dead within two days.

Anna's son Jamie and a friend Edward Hatfield are found playing with dead rats from a woodpile. Soon after, Edward, as well as Anna's infant son Tom, are ill with plague and die, as well as four other villagers. When Anna's older son Jamie dies as well, she is overcome with grief and guilt. Some villagers attempt to drown Mem Gowdie, the village healer, for witchcraft and causing the plague. Anys, Mem's daughter, tries to distract the crowd by saying that she is a witch, causing a villager to strike her. Mompellion's angry intervention disperses the mob, although both Anys and Mem die as a result of the crowd's brutality.

When several more plague deaths occur, the charismatic Mompellion urges his parishioners to quarantine themselves, in order not to contaminate others. He tells them that basic food and supplies will be left for them at the edge of the village, and promises to be with each person at the time of his death. Mompellion is a priest in the Church of England, which has recently replaced the stricter Puritan religion in England. The wealthy Colonel and Mrs. Bradford and immediate family depart after Mompellion's ruling. Two of their abandoned servants, attempting to join families outside town, are beaten severely, and one, Maggie Cantwell, dies.

Now childless, Anna assists Elinor in nursing the parishioners, learning midwifery and plague management. Elinor, suspecting that Anna's theft of some poppy seeds was grief-driven, shares her own secret: she was once so unhappy over a failed love affair that she aborted her own baby. Mompellion rescued and married her, for which she is filled with love and gratitude. As the friendship grows between the two women, Elinor teaches Anna to read; they study medical books on the plague. Mompellion is steadfast and inspirational, as he rushes from one deathbed to another and conducts burials.

The "ghost" of Mem Gowdie is passing out charms to ward off the plague. Anna's drunkard father has begun digging graves for plague victims, and at one point, demands payment before the victim is dead. The villagers impale him by knifepoint near a mine, and he dies. Aphra, his wife and Anna's stepmother, cannot rescue him, as her children are plague-stricken. Later, a villager identifies Aphra as the "ghost" who has been cheating the villagers. She is carried off to be tried later. At a thanksgiving ceremony for the plague's end, a crazed Aphra, carrying the remains of her fourth daughter, appears with a knife, threatening the rector. She accidentally stabs Elinor, who dies, and Aphra commits suicide.

With the plague over, and Elinor buried, Anna and Mompellion begin a love affair. Anna is repulsed when she learns Mompellion and Elinor's horrible secret: Mompellion had not slept with Elinor during their marriage because she needed to pay penance for the "sin" of her youth. Disillusioned, Anna boards passage on a ship to Northern Africa, taking the illegitimate child of Mrs. Bradford. There, she meets the famed Muslim doctor, Ahmed Bey, in need of a female assistant. He marries Anna to protect her from society's censure. She now raises her adopted daughter Aisha, as well as the baby conceived before she left England. The baby's name is Elinor, and she has Mompellion's eyes. Anna is uncertain if she has faith, but at least has hope.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

What is the significance of the title?

Year of Wonders takes its title from John Dryden's poem *Annus Mirabilis, The Year of Wonders*, written in 1666. Dryden, the outstanding literary figure of Restoration England, describes the plague year as a time "When spotted deaths ran arm'd through every street, with poisoned darts, which not the good could shun." The disease claimed about 1,000,000 lives in London alone. Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* also covers the inconclusive second war with the Dutch and Great Fire of London, which destroyed most of the city proper. St. Paul's Cathedral, more than 80 other churches, the Royal Exchange, the halls of 44 craft and trade guilds and about 13,000 houses were demolished. For Anna, the title refers to her witnessing the painful suffering of her neighbors, the death of her children, and finally, the "wonder" of her personal growth. The *Year of Wonders* is almost too much to comprehend for some. Mompellion suffers a loss of faith: "And now it seems that there is no God, and I was wrong" (p. 280). The villagers seem weary and shocked, (p. 266) "moving through their tasks in a weary daze." (The fictional village lost nearly 200 of its 303 inhabitants; actual numbers vary for Eyam, although it did lose two-thirds of the population). Dryden's poem seems apt: "And now those few who are return'd agen/Thy searching judgments to their dwellings trace."

What is the religious and social climate of the time?

Religion was in a state of flux in the mid-17th century and no longer had the tight hold it had upon the populace in Puritan times. When Parliament restored the monarchy under Charles II in 1660, Puritan rule under Oliver Cromwell and his son Richard Cromwell ended. The restoration of the monarchy also marked the end of Puritan laws against holidays, plays, music, dancing, outdoor games, and indoor games, such as dice and cards. The theaters had been closed for about 18 years, since the Puritans had ordered them closed in 1642. The plays and literature of this new period are marked with social satire, and even sexual and religious license, which Charles II, a pleasure-loving king, encouraged. The nobility and upper classes became known for their carefree and often morally loose living. The "lid was off," so to speak, at least in the cities and the court, if not the entire countryside.

The Restoration also brought back the Church of England, of which Mompellion is a representative. Mompellion's authority is considerable, but clearly not absolute, as it might have been in earlier times. While it is true that the Church of England was more tolerant than its predecessor, the stress and uncertainty caused by the plague causes people to chafe against the strictures of the church. The Bradfords can and do disobey the rector's command. Mrs. Bradford even becomes pregnant by an unnamed lover, which, while understandable given Mr. Bradford's cold character, is meant to underscore the upper class's flouting of the rules. Jane Martin's loose moral behavior and the crowd's attempted drowning of Mem Gowdie are examples of the village society's breaking apart.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Questions:

Anna, herself a Puritan, refers several times to how strictly the Puritans controlled their lives before the Church of England was restored. She describes how Puritan sermons “quieted the church bells,” ... “took the ale from the tavern and the lace from the dresses, the ribands from the Maypole and the laughter out of the public lanes.” (p. 7) When Anys Gowdie tells Anna that she will never marry because she prefers a variety of men, Anna is perplexed. The Puritans had taught “that all actions and thoughts could be only one of two natures: godly and right, or Satanic and evil.” (p. 55) She admires Anys’ good works as a healer, and yet is puzzled by her blasphemy. She realizes the world is more complicated than the Puritan either-or world of “light and dark.” Clearly, change is in the air when the plague hits. Mompellion has the sticky problem of being “the new kid on the block” when he asks the congregation to make its incredible sacrifice. Fortunately for him, he has the blessing of Thomas Stanley, the previous Puritan minister living outside the village.

Based upon what we know now, as compared to what the people knew then about the plague, why was the isolation of the village ironically cruel?

We must take into account that Anna and her contemporaries did not know how the plague started or was spread. They only knew that containment was effective in that it protected those outside the quarantined area. (When Viccars says, “Burn it all!” (p. 45) referring to his infested cloth, he suggests that Londoners had some clue). The tragic truth is that the characteristics of the disease did not favor the poor, who were the main inhabitants of the village. The origins of English plagues were most likely from infected ports overseas which reached the London docks. The disease was carried by fleas from infected rats in 90 per cent of the cases. Therefore, human contact with infected bundles of merchandise, and less commonly, infected rats themselves, were a factor in contamination. The poor, who more often lived in close to proximity to rats, were at greater risk, and those poor who were quarantined faced almost certain doom.

In the book *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, by John Walter and Roger Schofield, the authors point to the high incidence of infection between family members who were isolated. “Infected rats in a house, and the common use of beds and clothes, put all members of a family at risk. But compulsory isolation prevented wives and children being sent away, as they otherwise often were, and turned the risk of infection into a near certainty.” The evidence suggests that deaths were higher in towns where there was some form of quarantine practiced. Eyam’s figure, 72%, was one of the highest recorded, but others, such as Salisbury, had 61% of its deaths in households in family groups of three or more during its 1604 epidemic, according to the above study. Sadly, since the poor had closer proximity to rats and fleas, less frequent changes of clothing and bedding, and finally, less opportunity for flight, entire families were decimated. While isolation was a defended policy at the time, the cost to the particularly affected village was tremendously high.

While the courage of the villagers of both Eyam and the fictional village is undeniable, did they actually have a choice about the quarantine?

In reality, no. Anna reflects that perhaps she would flee if her children were alive. But in the words of Aphra, her stepmother, “it is not easy to surrender the safety of a roof and the certainty of bread for the perils of an open road, with winter setting in and no clear destination to its end.” (p. 113) In short, the unknown might be more dangerous than the known.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Questions:

The experience of Maggie Cantwell and Brand is an example of how the surrounding villages feared anyone from a “plague village” and beat them until they fled the city or died. A “plague village” was in fact trapped, with no chance of survival unless the infected community “voluntarily” cordoned itself off in exchange for aid. Rector Mompellion, with guidance from Reverend Stanley, realizes that this is the only way of guaranteeing any sort of help from the outside world. Thus, isolation was as much a pragmatic choice as a courageous one. In fact, the only people with a choice are the wealthy Bradfords, who had the resources for long distance travel to a destination where no one would recognize them. The Mompellions have a choice, but are bound morally to the village. By 1665, isolation of a complete city was a common method of dealing with the plague, according to the Walters and Schofield study. Salisbury’s quarantine in 1604 is but one example. The people of Eyam and the fictional village would already have had a mindset to accept a rector’s ruling, which would have made escape, even if possible, an antisocial response.

What effect does Mompellion’s “dark side” have upon the story?

Brooks says that Michael Mompellion is based upon the historical rector of Eyam, the altruistic William Mompesson, but only in the “admirable” aspects of his personality. His darker side is the author’s invention. We know also that the real rector William Mompesson sent his children away before the quarantine was agreed upon, and that his wife, who decided to stay, died of the plague. His letters during the time attest to his piety.

But for Brooks to characterize Mompellion as unremittingly good throughout the book would provide no tension, especially given the characters of Elinor and Anna. The rigidity of Mompellion allows him to exhort his parishioners to be strong (as he himself is), while it also demands Elinor’s penance in their marriage (which is just as difficult for him). His lack of compassion for the wayward Jane Martin (p. 222) and his embarrassment when Elinor asks during her fever, “... Michael, how much longer?” (p. 235) hint at his hypocrisy. But since these events do not occur until late in the story, his inspiration to the community is intact—only wrongly motivated.

The conditions of his marriage are perverse, and his desire for Elinor has been sublimated into his mission: “. . . I deemed that she should atone by living some part of her life with her lusts unrequited.” In order to do his work and master his desires, Mompellion consults the medieval teachings of the celibate Papists. (p. 280)

Brooks carefully distinguishes between the real and fictional rector. As Brooks says in her Afterword, “William Styron once wrote that the historical novelist works best if fed on ‘short rations’ by the factual record.” The fictional rector represents what can happen when one unquestioningly follows a flawed leader. Elinor, with her unending penance, has been made a martyr, literally and figuratively, at Mompellion’s hand. Anna’s realization that he is twisted and mad is part of the epiphany that propels her to leave.

Is Anna unusually young for her insights?

Probably. She serves as a transition figure for the age, however. In the beginning, she is charmingly provincial in her outlook and language. Her archaic words, like croft (small farm), sennight (seven days and nights), and boose (bed) propel us into the 1660s. They give us an idea of her confined scope. She has a sense of Puritanical duty in her almost unflinching assistance to those dying in agony, or when she descends into the pit of a lead mine (pp. 177-185) to extract a pan full of ore so that Merry Wickford can preserve her family’s claim.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Questions:

At the same time, she holds a certain skepticism, as evidenced in the aforementioned conversation with Anys Gowdie (p. 55). She is a seeker, and her sensibility grows with her education under Elinor, and her personal loss. She makes a startling statement which could be a metaphor for the age: "For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate" (p. 215).

Anna's statement symbolizes the beginning of modern thought. If the plague is simply an act of nature, and not a test sent by God, then people could find a cure, which is also in nature. If the villagers could balance the time they spent contemplating why they were so afflicted with how the plague spread, they could be better off, she reasons. People could be free to live their lives as they chose, "no matter if we were a village full of sinners or a host of saints" (p. 215). Anna's questioning of whether the plague is really God's judgment coincides with her broader reading of science and medicine, and echoes the thinking that is taking place in the larger cities of Europe: in short, that people can be the authors of their own fates.

Is the ending believable?

Given that Anna has found new independence and inner strength through the events of the plague year, her decision to become the wife of a Muslim healer, albeit in name only, seems a strange one. The author has covered her bases, however, and has earlier foreshadowed Anna's respect for the ancient Avicenna, the "Muselman doctor" (p. 154) whose teachings Bey follows. In her new country, only identified as the Barbary Coast, which today includes Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, she can practice medicine at a higher level than would be possible for her in England. Brooks carefully notes that Anna doesn't sleep with Bey. Since she has some degree of independence in her profession as a healer, her life might not be as controlled as Westerners would imagine.

Once Anna leaves Mompellion, events do seem rapid and choppy, in contrast to the pace of the rest of the book. After delivering a baby, rescuing it from drowning, escaping to Africa with Mr. Bradford in pursuit, Anna does have a need for peace, but for her to end up in a harem is hard to swallow. Nevertheless, when considering that author Brooks spent eleven years in the Middle East, one can forgive her interest in this part of the world and give her the benefit of the doubt. Her knowledge of Muslim culture gives Anna a new life that bridges the past: she is known by the name of her firstborn in this culture. ". . . so here I am Anna Frith no longer, but Umm Jamme—mother of Jamie. It pleases me to have my little boy remembered so" (p. 303).

What does this book say about human nature in times of tragedy?

Tragedy can bring out both vulnerability and strength in people. People often resort to the coping system or belief they know best. For the Puritans, it is the belief that the plague was a punishment from God, something to be endured. For Mompellion, it is a test for himself and the congregation, and an (egotistical) attempt to show the world his faith. For Elinor, it is a chance to show her love for Mompellion by her steadfast support, in spite of his cruel demands. For Joss Bont, Anna's father, and Aphra, it brings out an exploitation of people's grief: the selling of charms and digging graves for profit. For Anna, it is the chance to reinvent her life after it has been shattered. In short, tragedy brings forth the worst of humanity: uncommitted sex, witchcraft, and murder. It also brings out the best: faith, compassion, the courage to rebuild. This is not a pretty story, filled as it is with graphic descriptions of the plague sores, swollen armpits and blackened bodies. Brooks presents a spectrum of human reactions to crushing misfortune, as if to say, "this is sometimes how life is." Since Anna blossoms as a result of this disaster, she serves as a wonder of mental and moral strength.



Book: Year of Wonders

NoveList Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Further Reading:

Ann Benson, *The Plague Tales* (1977)

This historical novel alternates between a 14th century Spanish Jewish physician, Alejandro, who is battling plague in Europe and a 21st century forensic archaeologist, Janie, who accidentally unearths a cloth containing a 14th century plague bacillus in England. The plot, united by the Spanish doctor's ancient notebook, is a medical thriller, told in parallel form.

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1968)

First published in 1722, this is a poignant, often gruesome account of life as the bubonic plague stalks the streets of London during the summer and fall of 1665. Written in diary form, it is a historical and fictional reconstruction, considered one of the best literary accounts of this, or any other natural disaster.

Judith Miller, Stephen Engelberg, William J. Broad, *Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War* (2001)

As long as we are talking about plague and pestilence, we should look at today's world of germ warfare. Written by three *New York Times* reporters, this non-fiction book provides a historical survey of the development and use of biological weapons, from 1972, when the U.S. withdrew from development of bio-weapons, to the Soviet and Iraqi germ warfare programs, which have systematically violated the 1972 accord. It is a horrifying look at how scientific advances in biology, if put into the wrong hands, could make germs the atomic bomb of the 21st century.

Janine Montupet, *The Lacemaker* (1988)

A 17th century historical novel with a French sensibility, this story is set in Alecon, the lace-making capital. Gilonne, the illegitimate daughter of an aristocrat, is apprenticed at five to the lace trade. A period romance with a feisty heroine and plenty of detail, including how those delicate lace collars were made, the persecution of Protestants during the Catholic rule of Louis XIV, and amusing social insights.

Connie Willis, *Doomsday Book* (1992)

Historians of the future do their research by traveling back in time to the period they want to study. A specialist in the Middle Ages travels to 14th-Century England and arrives just in time to encounter the first big plague epidemic to hit Britain. Meanwhile, a major influenza outbreak has hit the space-time she traveled from, and it's doubtful whether she can get back. A fascinating (and thrilling) account of both Medieval England and the effects of epidemics on society.

Sheri Holman, *The Dress Lodger* (2000)

In 1831 in Sunderland, England, a young girl named Gustine is trapped in a world of poverty and prostitution, and finds herself in the midst of a cholera epidemic. The story has many themes in common with *Year of Wonders*, including class conflicts, the inadequacy of epidemiology and other aspects of medicine, and the status of women.

September, 2002

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Ginger Terry, former English instructor at Front Range Community College in Westminster, Colorado and Metropolitan State College, Denver.



Book: Year of Wonders

Penguin Book Discussion Guide:

http://us.penguinroutledge.com/static/rguides/us/year_of_wonders.html

Introduction:

“God’s Wrath Made Manifest”?

The 1600s marked both the dawn of modern medicine and the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment all over Europe. In England, these years also brought the Restoration—a revolution in every aspect of life against Oliver Cromwell’s Puritanism. English physicians charted the circulatory system, and the invention of the compound microscope and identification of bacteria were together about to begin unraveling the mystery of infectious disease. In 1662, King Charles established the Royal Society in order to promote the study of natural science. The world was changing rapidly, and its central focus shifted from God to man.

In 1665, in the remote English village of Eyam—a small and closely knit community of lead miners and shepherds, cobblers and weavers—the bubonic plague (“The Black Death”) has taken the town hostage both literally and figuratively. In a decision brought about by Michael Mompellion, the radical but much-admired town minister, the villagers of Eyam quarantine themselves in their “wide green prison” and vow to suffer the scourge alone. Believing that the plague is God’s judgment on their sinful world, most of the devoutly Christian villagers beg forgiveness and look for ways to assuage God’s ire—the most puritanical take up self-flagellation in an attempt to cleanse themselves. Almost completely cut off from the outside world (save for the ingenious “boundary stone”), and after panic has well and truly set in, the villagers turn on one another. In episodes that illustrate both the best of human nature (ministering to the sick) and the worst (a gravedigger profiteering from the dead), the townspeople grapple with their grief and fear. It is up to the story’s heroine—a young, widowed housemaid named Anna Frith—to raise the existential questions about the origins of the plague, and she therefore becomes the embodiment of the conflict at the center of the novel: God versus Nature.

It came to me then that we, all of us, spent a very great deal of time pondering these questions that, in the end, we could not answer. If we balanced the time we spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted us, with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned our blood, then we might come nearer to saving our lives. While these thoughts were vexing, they brought with them also a chink of light. For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village of sinners or a host of saints.

After suffering the death of her suitor and her two children, and despite her own spiritual beliefs and adoration for the rector and his wife, Anna boldly rejects the idea that the pestilence is a call for repentance. And in a time of such turmoil, she shrugs off the social and religious mores that would keep a weaker woman in her place. With the knowledge about herbal remedies that she has gleaned from the village herbalists Mem and Anys Gowdie, and the support and tutelage of her patroness, Elinor Mompellion, Anna emerges more powerful and self-confident than before. At the end of the novel, it is clear she has become stronger than even Michael Mompellion, the town’s figurehead and religious rock. Anna’s questions—and her role as a village healer—will eventually lead her to her true calling. Caught up in the struggle between science and religion, Anna’s dilemma mirrors that of the world in her time. Ultimately she confesses: “I cannot say that I have faith anymore. Hope, perhaps. We have agreed that it will do for now.”



Book: Year of Wonders

Penguin Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

About Geraldine Brooks:

Geraldine Brooks is the author of two acclaimed works of nonfiction, the bestselling *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* and *Foreign Correspondence: A Penpal's Journey from Down Under to All Over*. She is also a former war correspondent whose writing has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*.

An Interview with Geraldine Brooks:

In your afterword, you describe chancing upon Eyam and its terrible history while living in England in 1990. Can you tell us a bit about your research—for instance, what you uncovered about the townspeople and perhaps didn't include in the novel for whatever reason? What about the difficulties of writing a story that blends fiction with historical fact, especially given your journalistic, just-the-facts background?

The written record of what happened in Eyam during the plague year is scant. Apart from three letters by the rector, no narrative account from the year itself actually exists. The “histories” that purport to record the facts were actually written many years later, and historians have found inconsistencies that cast doubt on their accuracy. Therefore, there was no way to write a satisfying nonfiction narrative. And, since the story had taken root in my imagination, the only way to indulge my impulse to tell it was to take the leap into fiction. The factual basis of the story was actually very helpful to me: it was like having the framing of the house already erected—I could see the shape from the beginning. The things I decided not to use from the anecdotal accounts passed down over time were those things that would have seemed most like implausible inventions. For example, a young couple is said to have lived in the church around the plague time, seeking sanctuary from the law. The couple had been married by accident, having drunkenly taken part in a mock wedding at a tavern that was later deemed to have the force of law and sacrament. Unfortunately, the groom was already engaged to another woman. She, enraged, sought his arrest for breach of promise. The couple apparently lived a reasonable life in the church, assisted by sympathetic villagers. This story, although reasonably well substantiated, just seemed too odd to weave into my novel.

You describe the man on whom Michael Mompellion was based, William Mompesson, as “heroic and saintly” and yet you also believe that Mompesson and his wife sent their two children away before quarantining the town. How do you justify your description of the real man? And do you think this knowledge influenced your depiction of the “darker side” of the Mompellion character?

One of the fictional liberties I took with the story was a certain compression of timeframe. The plague was actually in the village for many weeks before the quarantine was agreed upon. Some people decided to send their children away into the care of relatives: there was nothing unethical in the Mompessons also choosing to do so. It was only as the epidemic really took hold that Mompesson saw the fearful virulence of the disease and became concerned about the consequences of its spread. There is nothing in the factual record to suggest that he behaved other than honorably throughout the village's terrible ordeal. However, in trying to imagine him—a young man, not long out of school, not long in a village where most of the Puritan-leaning population did not share his religious views, yet still persuasive enough to bring people to such a momentous choice—I envisioned a man of powerful conviction and charisma. Such personalities are sometimes governed by unwholesome motivations, such as the belief that they are God's infallible instruments. They can be dangerous, even deadly.



Book: Year of Wonders

Penguin Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Do you believe Anna is an unlikely heroine, given the rigid class structures of her time and her sex? Why did you choose to tell this story from Anna's point of view? Did your nonfiction—and in particular your book *Nine Parts of Desire*, which deals with the lives of Muslim women—influence your decision?

I wanted a narrator who was part of the ordinary life of the village, but also had access to the gentry, the decision-makers. Since I knew that the real rector had a maid who survived the plague, she seemed the obvious choice. Anna's character and the changes it undergoes were suggested to me by the lives of women I had met during my years as a reporter in the Middle East and Africa—women who had lived lives that were highly circumscribed and restricted, until thrown into sudden turmoil by a crisis such as war or famine. These women would suddenly find themselves having to step out of their old roles and assume vastly challenging responsibilities. I saw women who had traveled enormous personal distances—traditional village women in Eritrea who became platoon leaders in the country's independence war; Kurdish women who led their families to safety over mined mountain passes after the failure of their uprising against Saddam Hussein. If those women could change and grow so remarkably, I reasoned that Anna could, too. And remember that the Restoration was a very fluid time. All the ancient certainties—the monarchy, the Church—had been challenged within these people's lifetime. They had lived through regicide, revolution, civil war. Change was their norm. In the 1660s, women were appearing on the stage for the first time, were assuming influential roles in the Restoration court. Also, life in the villages was much less rigid and restrictive than we often imagine. I read a lot of sermons while researching the novel, and it struck me that the amount of hectoring from the pulpit on the proper behavior of women probably reflected a widely held view that a lot of “improper” behavior was going on.

In light of your research, can you put into perspective just how extraordinary the villagers' decision to quarantine themselves was? What was happening in London, for example, at the same time?

The unique thing about Eyam's quarantine was that it was voluntary. I was able to find no other examples of such communal self-sacrifice. In London, Samuel Pepys writes in his journal of the terrible treatment meted out to plague victims: “We are become as cruel as dogs one to another.” There, the houses of plague victims were sealed and guarded, locking in the well with the ill, with no one to bring food, water, or comfort of any kind. Pepys writes that you could hear the cries of the afflicted coming from the houses, which were marked with large red crosses and the words “God Have Mercy.”

In a piece published in *The Washington Post* after the September 11, 2001, attacks, you wrote: “Whether we also shall one day look back upon this year of flames, germs and war as a ‘Year of Wonders’ will depend, perhaps, on how many are able—like the passengers on United Flight 93 or the firefighters of New York City—to match the courageous self-sacrifice of the people of Eyam.” Will you discuss the parallels you have drawn here?

Eyam is a story of ordinary people willing to make an extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of others. September 11, 2001, revealed heroism in ordinary people who might have gone through their lives never called upon to demonstrate the extent of their courage. Sadly, it also revealed a blind thirst for revenge that led to the murders of a Muslim, a Sikh, and an Egyptian Copt. I have imagined this same instinct to turn on and blame “the other” in the lynching of the Gowdies. Love, hate, fear. The desire to live and to see your children live. Are these things different on a beautiful autumn morning in a twenty-first-century city than they were in an isolated seventeenth-century village? I don't think so. One thing I believe completely is that the human heart remains the human heart, no matter how our material circumstances change as we move together through time.



Book: Year of Wonders

Penguin Book Discussion Guide: (Continued)

Discussion Questions:

All of the characters in this novel have their failings and as a result they are all fully human. Are you surprised by the secrets Elinor and Michael Mompellion each reveal to Anna about their marriage? How do they change your feelings about each character? Do they make either seem weaker in a way?

The Bradford family bears the brunt of Mompellion's rage when they leave town to save themselves. However, weren't they only doing what every other noble family did in those days: run because they had the means to run? Setting aside the events near the end of the novel (which make it clear that one would be hard-pressed to find a redeeming quality in any of them), can you really blame the Bradfords for running?

How much of Mompellion's push for the quarantine had to do with the secrets he shared with Elinor? Did his own dark side and self-loathing push him to sacrifice the town or was he really acting out of everyone's best interests?

Keeping in mind that this story takes place a good twenty-five years before the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts, what is the role of the Gowdie women in the novel? What is it about these women that drives their neighbors to murderous rage? How does their nonconformity lead to their becoming scapegoats?

How would you explain Anna's mental and spiritual unraveling? What are the pivotal experiences leading up to her breakdown and her eventual rebirth?

Discuss the feminist undertones of the story. How does each female character—Anna, Elinor, the Gowdies, and even Anna's stepmother—exhibit strengths that the male characters do not?

In a story where the outcome is already known from the very beginning—most of the villagers will die—discuss the ways in which the author manages to create suspense.

The author creates an incredible sense of time and place with richly textured language and thoughtful details—of both the ordinary (everyday life in Eyam) and the extraordinary (the gruesome deaths of the villagers). Discuss some of the most vivid images and their importance to the story and to your own experience reading it.

Can we relate the story of this town's extraordinary sacrifice to our own time? Is it unrealistic to expect a village facing a similar threat to make the same decision nowadays? What lessons might we learn from the villagers of Eyam?



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Year of Wonders

Reviews:

The New York Times Book Review, May 12, 2002

The author's first work of fiction unfolds through the eyes of a servant in the household of a rector in a 17th-century English village devastated by twin calamities: the plague, which kills two-thirds of the villagers, and the quarantine the community imposes on itself. "Brooks has clearly done her homework," John Vernon said here in 2001. "She gives us what we want from historical fiction: a glimpse into the strangeness of history that simultaneously enables us to see a reflection of ourselves." - Veale, Scott.

Copyright 2002 *The New York Times* Company

Publishers Weekly, June 25, 2001

* Discriminating readers who view the term historical novel with disdain will find that this debut by praised journalist Brooks (*Foreign Correspondence*) is to conventional work in the genre as a diamond is to a rhinestone. With an intensely observant eye, a rigorous regard for period detail, and assured, elegant prose, Brooks re-creates a year in the life of a remote British village decimated by the bubonic plague. Inspired by the actual town commemorated as Plague Village because of the events that transpired there in 1665-1666, Brooks tells her harrowing story from the perspective of 18-year-old Anna Frith, a widow with two young sons. Anna works as a maid for vicar Michael Mompellion and his gentle, selfless wife, Elinor, who has taught her to read. When bubonic plague arrives in the community, the vicar announces it as a scourge sent by God; obeying his command, the villagers voluntarily seal themselves off from the rest of the world. The vicar behaves nobly as he succors his dwindling flock, and his wife, aided by Anna, uses herbs to alleviate their pain. As deaths mount, however, grief and superstition evoke mob violence against "witches," and cults of self-flagellation and devil worship. With the facility of a prose artist, Brooks unflinchingly describes barbaric 17th-century customs and depicts the fabric of life in a poor rural area. If Anna's existential questions about the role of religion and ethical behavior in a world governed by nature seem a bit too sophisticated for her time, Brooks keeps readers glued through starkly dramatic episodes and a haunting story of flawed, despairing human beings. This poignant and powerful account carries the pulsing beat of a sensitive imagination and the challenge of moral complexity. (Aug. 6)

Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information

Library Journal Review, July 2001

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Usually, "Black Death" brings to mind thoughts of a 14th-century Europe ravaged and emptied by pestilence. But there were plague outbreaks throughout the early modern period, notably in England in 1665-66. Particularly hard hit during that particular epidemic was the Derbyshire village of Eyam, whose story is told here. The plague traveled to Eyam in a bundle of cloth. The unfortunate recipient, a tailor, then becomes the first to die in an epidemic that leaves the village shrunk to one-third of its former population. What makes the tale of Eyam remarkable is that the citizens, led by their pastor, agreed to impose a quarantine on themselves in order to stop the plague from spreading. The usual response to news of plague in early modern Europe was flight, for there was no cure and death was almost certain. Brooks (*Foreign Correspondence*) tells the story of Eyam's heroic battle



Book: Year of Wonders

Reviews: (Continued)

from the perspective of young Anna Frith, servant to the pastor and his wife. Widowed before the epidemic, Anna is the mother of two small children and landlady to the unfortunate tailor. She nurses her friends and family to little avail during the horrors of the plague year, but her spirit remains unbroken. Like Eyam itself, Anna prevails and lives to see another day. Fans of Judith Merkle Riley's historical novels (e.g., *Master of All Desires*, LJ 11/15/99) will find much to savor in the new work. Recommended for all fiction collections. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 4/15/01.] Wendy Bethel, Grove City P.L., OH Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information.

School Library Journal Review, November 2001

Website: <http://www.cahners.com>

Adult/High School—Brooks's title is based on the actual lead-mining village of Eyam, Derbyshire, whose inhabitants voluntarily quarantined themselves for a year when stricken with Bubonic Plague in 1665-1666. Anna Frith is widowed at 18 by a mining accident and is the mother of two young boys. Through her recollections, readers live through the year as her endurance and abilities are sorely tested. Anna works for the new young minister's wife, who teaches her to read and becomes more of a companion than a mistress. At her employers' suggestion, Anna takes in a boarder to help meet expenses. The man is a tailor and when a shipment of fabrics, apparently flea infested, is delivered from London, the plague is suddenly upon them. The minister convinces his flock to make the supreme sacrifice and arranges for food and supplies to be delivered to the outskirts of the hamlet. The story is a portrait of the best and worst in people faced with sorrow, terror, and death. Some succumb to madness, others display cowardice and hysteria, and a few look for solutions in murder or self-mutilation. Through it all, however, Anna grows in strength, abilities, and understanding as she faces the loss of her children, her friends, and her innocence, and takes on the tasks of an ever-dwindling populace. This is an excellently portrayed study of the wonder of human courage. Carol DeAngelo, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information.

BookPage Review, 2001 August

Website: <http://www.bookpage.com>

No epidemic has equaled the devastation of the Bubonic Plague, which decimated between one-third and three-quarters of Europe's population in the Middle Ages and continued to flare up in destructive pockets for centuries after. In *Year of Wonders*, Geraldine Brooks eerily captures every aspect of life during the plague—the gruesomely painful death, the speed with which the disease spread and the superstitions surrounding it, which rivaled the plague itself for horror.

Brooks takes as her inspiration the town of Eyam, a real-life village in England's Derbyshire countryside. The skeleton of her novel comes from history, from a mysterious and unpredicted outbreak of the plague in Eyam. For reasons we will never know for sure, but which played fiercely on the writer's imagination, the people of Eyam took a vow not to run from their village in the hope of saving themselves. Instead, they stayed put and nursed each other until death did them part. It is reasonable to view this extraordinary sacrifice as a public service, as the inhabitants of Eyam thus kept the contagion within their village when they could so easily have panicked and, in fleeing the scene of death, taken the infection all over rural England.

The Bubonic Plague may sound like a morbid subject. Yet the topic fascinates, in part because a study of the plague is always a study in human nature, revealing the extremes of nobility and depravity people are capable of when faced with pain and fear of the unknown. Brooks uses the story of Eyam as a backdrop for characters and stories that illustrate these extremes.



Book: Year of Wonders

Reviews: (Continued)

Year of Wonders could not have been an easy novel to write. In the ordinary disaster narrative, suspense comes from not knowing whether the community under attack will survive its menace. But anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the Black Death knows from the beginning how *Year of Wonders* will end. At least two-thirds of the village will die. As a microcosm of the epidemic, Eyam's death toll will mirror the plague's overall totals.

So Brooks must create suspense elsewhere, surprising us by how this character rises to the challenge with tireless dedication while that one succumbs to depression and another loses her mind. The full range of plague-related superstitions finds its way into Brooks' Eyam. Some villagers look for a witch to blame while others dabble in witchcraft, hoping to ward off their fate. One character takes to self-flagellation in the hope of placating an angry Christian God.

The story is told through the eyes of Anna Frith, a young woman with two boys to raise. Frith is the widow of a miner, and she works as a servant in the homes of the village squire and rector. In most ways, she is a conventional, if unusually quick-witted, woman. She married young, her education is haphazard, and she is disinclined to question the religious beliefs that serve as the town's infrastructure. Were it not for the plague, she would no doubt have lived and died in the same 17th century English country village, without leaving a detectable trace. The extraordinary circumstances of the plague derail her from this path of least resistance and evoke a heroism in her character of which even she herself is only vaguely aware until the novel's last pages.

A native of Australia and a former correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, Geraldine Brooks has previously written two critically acclaimed works of nonfiction, *Foreign Correspondence* and *Nine Parts of Desire*. With *Year of Wonders*, she proves equally adept at writing gripping historical fiction.

Lynn Hamilton writes from Tybee Island, Georgia. Copyright 2001 *BookPage* Reviews

Salon Review, Dec. 6, 2001

<http://www.salon.com/books/review/2001/12/06/brooks/>

An English Village Struck by the Plague Heroically Quarantines Itself and Braces for the Worst.

By Suzy Hansen

The title of Geraldine Brooks' first novel, *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*, appears contradictory. But it's also intriguing and hopeful: A book about something as devastating as the bubonic plague that somehow includes "wonders" holds out the promise of miracles—or of survival at the least.

That promise is only partly fulfilled, for Brooks, a former war correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, remains devoted to capturing both the ugly essence of the plague and the less seemly sides of human nature that disease brings out. *Year of Wonders* loosely follows the true story of Eyam, Derbyshire, an English village struck by the plague in 1666. The villagers heroically quarantined themselves so as not to spread the notoriously vicious scourge, a decision that meant increasing the risk of their own infection and death.

Year of Wonders begins with the bright but uneducated 18-year-old narrator, Anna, a widow, feeling the pangs of new love for her lodger, a tailor who dazzles the modest village with his fancy cloth and beautiful designs. He soon falls mysteriously ill and dies, presumably infected by disease-ridden cloth from London. Anna loses both of her children to the plague early on, but she becomes the town's strength and reason, as well as a servant to the



Book: Year of Wonders

Reviews: (Continued)

pastor, Michael Mompellion and his beautiful wife, Elinor. It is the strangely compelled Mompellion, the resident interpreter of God's will, who urges the town to cut itself off for the good of the outlying countryside.

The novel is filled with moments of compassion and sadness, as when Anna comes to terms with the lingering presence of the dead: "Sometimes, if I walked the main street of the village in the evening, I felt the press of their ghosts. I realized then that I had to step small and carry myself all hunched, keeping my arms at my sides and my elbows tucked, as if to leave room for them." Yet with the same steady hand Brooks uses to paint the beauty of the English countryside, she details the gruesome minutiae of the disease. No sooner do her descriptions of a mother's love for her child or a housewife's simple, daily chores lull and mesmerize, than Brooks pans the landscape, bestowing the same respectful observation on a putrid plague boil. Mothers fall asleep sweetly hugging their dying babies, only to find the infants' liquified bowels soaking the sheets the next morning.

In the face of this devastation, Anna rejects the villagers' explanations for the sufferings visited upon them: God's will, a Cross to bear, a witch's curse, the Devil's work. Brooks writes, "Perhaps the Plague was neither of God nor the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature, as the stone on which we stub a toe." It's Anna's own native intelligence, and her lack of the prejudices and imperatives of a Medieval education, that allow her to accept that the village has experienced something beyond human comprehension. In a way, it's as if Anna's capacity for curiosity and reflection—this sense of wonder that so infuses Brooks' perspective—ensures her very survival.